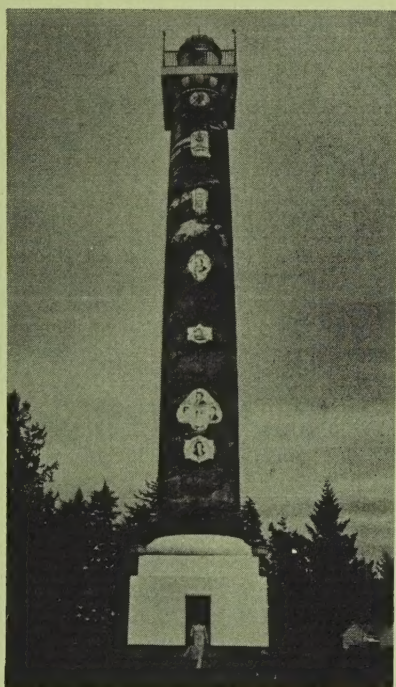


A
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OF

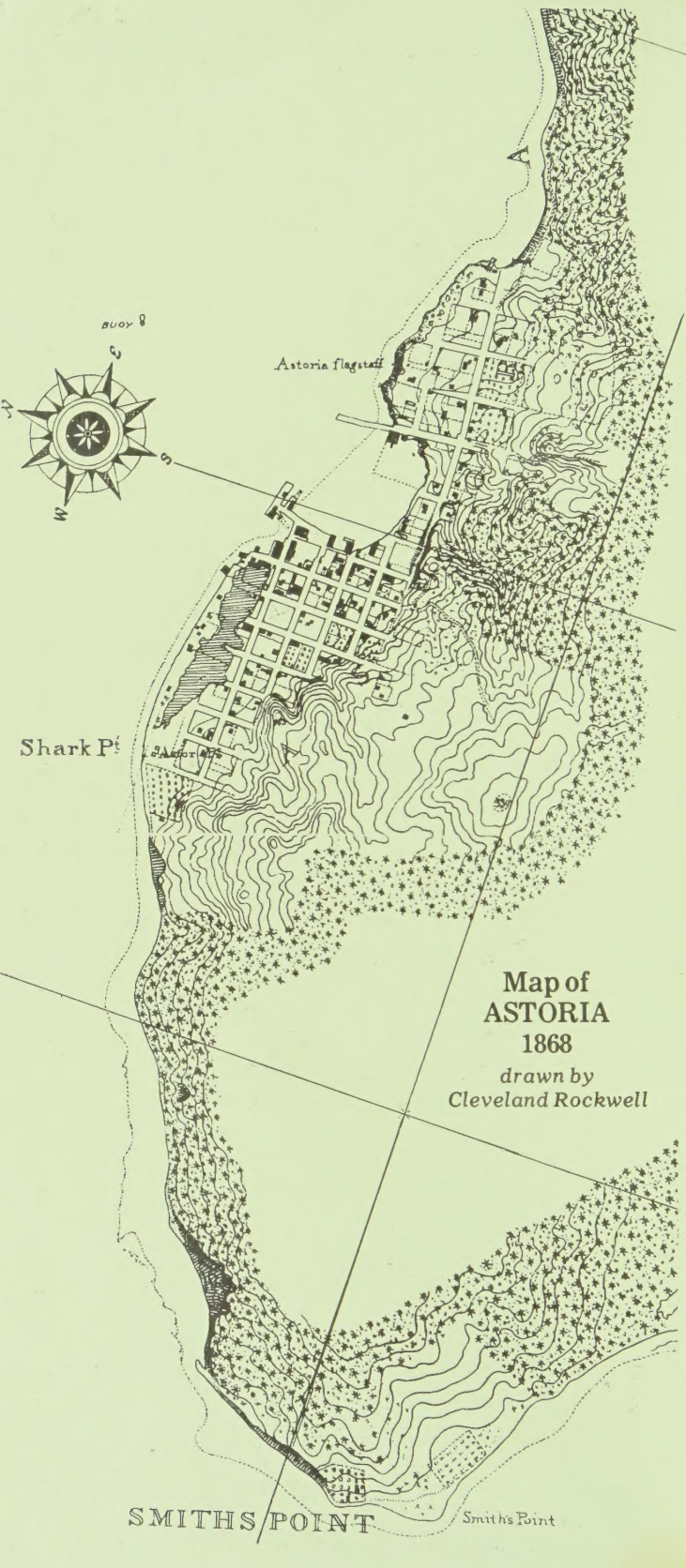
ASTORIA
OREGON

1811-1900



Compiled and written
by
Vera Whitney Gault

\$1.50



BUOY 8

Astoria flagstaff

Shark Pt

Map of
ASTORIA
1868

drawn by
Cleveland Rockwell

SMITHS POINT

Smiths Point

**A
BRIEF HISTORY
OF
ASTORIA, OREGON
1811-1900**

"Let days speak, and
many years teach wisdom."



Compiled and Written
by
Vera Whitney Gault

Greetings

to Astorians and friends from far and near who come to visit.

May this booklet be a source of enjoyment as you expand your knowledge and appreciation of the rich historic heritage of this unique locality.

The Cover Picture

The Astoria Column rises from the summit of Coxcomb Hill within the city limits. Visitors may follow the Scenic Route signs to an elevation of 700 feet, climb another 125 feet to the observation platform, and enjoy an awesome view of the city, the Columbia River, and distant forests and mountains. *Photo courtesy Daily Astorian.*

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF ASTORIA, OREGON

A PLAN TAKES ROOT

In May 1792, Captain Robert Gray discovered the Columbia River and sailed inland as far as Tongue Point.

In December 1805, Lewis and Clark completed their heroic trip across the continent and set up winter headquarters at Fort Clatsop.

In March 1811, John Jacob Astor's men established a fur trading post on the bank of the Columbia River and named it Astoria.

These three events commemorated by the spiral pictographs on the Astoria Column provided the chief claims that helped to secure the Oregon country for the United States.

John Jacob Astor, born in Waldorf, Germany, was already New York's wealthiest fur merchant when he dreamed of establishing a chain of fur trading posts across the continent. As the first step, he organized the Pacific Fur Trading Company with one hundred shares (\$200,000), of which he retained fifty, selling the others to partners. He then outfitted a merchant ship, the *Tonquin*. On September 6, 1810, the ship left New York with thirty-three passengers, including five shareholders, and twenty-one crewmen aboard and sailed around the Horn to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). There it took on food, trade goods, livestock, and twenty-four Islanders to help establish the new outpost.

ASTOR'S MEN ARRIVE

The voyage to the mouth of the Columbia River was long and rough. As they neared their destination, a violent storm broke. Many of the animals were washed overboard, and eight men were drowned while attempting to sound the channel. Finally, on March 22, 1811, the *Tonquin* entered the river with the remaining men, diminished supplies, and livestock, which included fifty pigs.

After some searching, the ship anchored on April 5 at what appeared to be the most suitable landing, the foot of Astoria's present 15th and 16th Streets. The men's first job ashore was to build a pen for the pigs. Within four days they had planted vegetable seeds and the twelve shriveled potatoes they had managed to save from their food supply. By the end of the summer, they had constructed several log cabins and storehouses with roofs of cedar boughs and had harvested one hundred ninety potatoes and a good supply of turnips. The **Tonquin** had remained until June 1, when it sailed on to the west coast of Vancouver Island, where its crew was massacred and the ship blown up.

Duncan McDougall, one of the shareholders, became the factor in charge of the trading post. Wishing to be on good terms with the Indians, he went across the river to pay his respects to Comcomly, chief of the Chinook nation. Later, he married the Chief's eldest daughter. Comcomly was very proud of his son-in-law until he visited the post one day and found him hoeing potatoes. Angrily, Comcomly told his tribesmen that Illchee had married a squaw.

During the autumn of 1811, the Astorians, their resources dwindling, waited hopefully for the supplies which Astor had promised when he dispatched an overland party headed by Wilson Price Hunt and Donald McKenzie. They finally arrived in January 1812, exhausted, emaciated, and in tatters.



Astoria in 1813: Courtesy Clatsop County Historical Museum.

As the Indians became increasingly unfriendly, McDougall ordered a stockade built with two blockhouses mounted with guns. Thenceforth, the trading post was called **Fort Astoria**. At the end of the second summer, the men harvested five bushels of potatoes; at the end of the third, fifty bushels — this was the fall of 1813 when the British took over the fort.

FORT ASTORIA BECOMES FORT GEORGE

The War of 1812 had been in progress for a year, but it did not affect Fort Astoria until the men received word that a British warship was headed for the west coast. Trade at the fort was scanty; food supplies were low, and the men were discouraged. Astor had sent two other ships to help. One, the **Lark**, had wrecked near the Sandwich Islands. The **Beaver** had put some supplies ashore and sailed on.

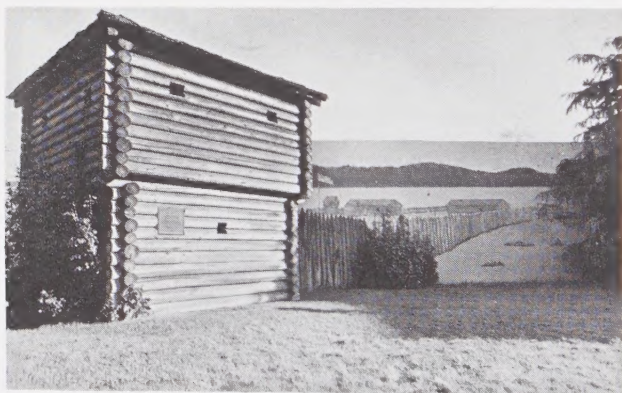
Now with the war in progress, the stockholders realized no more help could arrive, so they agreed to sell their shares and those of John Jacob Astor to the North West Fur Company, a British outfit whose agent, John George McTavish, had come from Fort Spokane to urge the deal. When the transaction was concluded in October 1813, Agent McTavish offered employment to all of Astor's men who wished to remain and retained Duncan McDougall as second in command. McTavish also reported that the British merchant ship, the **Isaac Todd**, was expected to enter the river most any day, at which time, a North West Company executive, Donald McTavish, would take charge of Fort Astoria.

In the meantime, the British sloop-of-war, the **Raccoon**, arrived on December 13. Officers and crew were dismayed to sight the British flag flying over the fort, for they had anticipated a glorious victory and a sharing of the spoils of war. However, the captain rallied valiantly. He broke a bottle of wine against the flag staff, proclaiming in sonorous tones that he hereby christened the establishment Fort George in honor of His Britannic Majesty, King George of England. Thus, after two and a half years, the wrecking of two ships, and the loss of a lonesome, little post which he had never seen, John Jacob Astor's dream of a fur trading empire came to an end — the only financial failure, tradition says, that Astor ever suffered.

A NEW ERA BEGINS

Four months later, on April 17, 1814, the long-expected British ship, the *Isaac Todd*, crossed the Columbia bar and anchored off the Fort George landing. The ship, luxuriously outfitted, had enjoyed a thirteen-month passage from Portsmouth, England, with the portly, middle-aged Donald McTavish ready to take regal command of Fort George. Then, to the wonderment of all the watching eyes on shore, who should disembark with him but a lively, blue-eyed, flaxen-haired, former Portsmouth barmaid, Jane Barnes. McTavish had become enchanted with the maid a few days and nights before sailing and enticed her to sail with him to help provide all the comforts of home during the long voyage. Thus the comely Jane became the first white woman to set foot in Astoria, thirty years before the arrival of the revered ladies of the wagon trains.

Then tragically, only a month later, on Sunday, May 22, Jane Barnes was bereft of her protector, for Donald McTavish and five others were drowned as they were rowing out to the *Isaac Todd*. The body of McTavish washed ashore two days later and was buried on the grounds of the Fort. The gravestone, moved several times to make room for townsite expansion, now rests in the small park on present-day Exchange Street between 15th and 16th which marks the location of the original Fort Astoria.



Fifteenth and Exchange Streets; Original site of Fort Astoria and tombstone of British factor, Donald McTavish. The park area including a replica of one of the Fort's bastions was developed in 1956. Photo courtesy of Daily Astorian.

During that summer, Jane doubtless had no lack of benefactors, but she had caught the eye and admiration of Cassakas, son of Chief Comcomly, and crown prince of the Chinook nation. He came courting one day, his head arrayed with eagle feathers, his body glistening with red paint and whale oil. His princely offer was that if she would become his wife, he would make her mistress over his four other wives, would give her one hundred otter skins for her family, would never ask her to carry wood or water or dig for roots, and she would always have an abundance of fat salmon and elk to eat. Jane rejected this royal proposal several times before Cassakas angrily returned to his own side of the river.

The men at the Fort could see that letting Jane remain meant trouble with the Indians, so when the Isaac Todd sailed for China, Jane Barnes was aboard. Eventually she found her way back to England, where a note in history reports her trying to collect wages from the North West Fur Company for the time she was away.

The British immediately expanded the fur trading operation at Fort George. They extended the clearing from about two acres to eighty and installed a huge stock of trade goods. They built a large, two-story residence for the factor, spacious dwelling quarters for the clerks, mechanics, and laborers, a tailor shop, a hospital, and sheds for storage and for the animals. Altogether, about one hundred fifty men were employed there, most of whom kept Indian women. The next decade was the Golden Age for fur trading posts all over the northwest, and Fort George was known far and wide as one of the biggest and best.

Then in 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company bought the North West Fur Company and Fort George. Three years later, George Simpson, governor of Hudson's Bay, arrived at Fort George on an inspection tour. In his report he wrote, "Fort George is a pile of large buildings with an air of grandeur and consequence completely unsuitable for an Indian trading post." He ordered most of the equipment and supplies sent up river where he established Fort Vancouver in 1825 with Dr. John McLoughlin in charge. The livestock inventory at the time of the move listed twenty-five head of cattle, seventy-seven horses, and four pigs. The large staff was dispersed and many of the spacious buildings left unoccupied.

FORT GEORGE NURTURES AN ADVENTURER

A Britisher, Archibald MacDonald, remained to take charge of the skeleton fort. Records state that the Indians rapidly took possession of the empty buildings, reducing them to a state of filth and ruin. By 1826, nearly all had burned. During his assignment at Fort George, Archibald MacDonald had married Princess Raven, a daughter of Chief Comcomly. In the spring of 1824, their son, Ranald, was born. His mother died soon after. His father reared the lad carefully and his grandfather, Comcomly, adored him. He was sent to school first at Fort Vancouver, then on to Winnepeg.

Ranald MacDonald earned a place in history when, by sheer determination and a shrewd plan, he managed to gain entrance to Japan, a nation which had been isolated from the world for two centuries. At age twenty-four and as the first teacher of English in Japan, Ranald drove the wedge which enabled Commodore Perry to open trade with Japan in 1854. As the grandson of Chief Comcomly, he was entitled to a portion of his grandfather's wealth but could not claim it because his whereabouts were unknown at the time of distribution. After returning from Japan, he spent most of his life in a variety of mining and other business ventures in British Columbia, none of which were successful. Ranald MacDonald died in 1894 near Kettle Falls, Washington, where he is buried.

In 1828, Hudson's Bay Company rebuilt Fort George, for in 1827, the **Owhyhee**, first American ship to be sighted on the west coast since 1814, had anchored near the Fort to check on trade prospects, and Hudson's Bay wanted to keep an eye on the competition. Also, British ships headed for Fort Vancouver often needed assistance and supplies. The 1830's thus became the period known as joint occupancy, actually a period of trade rivalry. One report describes the settlement as a cluster of cabins at one end of the clearing designated by the pompous name of Fort George, and a shack and shed at the other end known by the original name of Fort Astoria.

PIONEERS ARRIVE

In 1840, the Reverend John Frost was assigned by Jason Lee at the Methodist Mission in Salem to come to the north coast to evangelize the Indians. Frost was entertained at Fort George by James Birnie, factor since 1839, his Indian wife, Charlotte, and their six daughters. He described the

location as a small clearing sloping down to the river. He noted that the factor's home was a one-story building thirty by sixty feet with nearby sheds for furs and for the storage of supplies and shelter for the animals. He also noted that "Mr. Birnie had a fine patch of potatoes."

However, this isolation was soon to change, for the wagon train of 1843 brought settlers to the Willamette Valley, and a few hardy souls pushed on to the edge of the continent. First to come were James Shively, William Hobson, John McClure, and A.W. Wilson. Since by the Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812, the land belonged to the United States, these settlers filed their claims with Washington, D.C. McClure claimed the land from Astoria's present First Street to 13th; Shively from 13th Street to 32nd, and Wilson east from 32nd. Hobson settled on Clatsop Plains. In 1846, international boundaries were finally fixed at the 49th parallel. Fort George was officially closed, and James Birnie moved across the Columbia River where he started the settlement of Cathlamet.

By the end of 1846, four more white men had moved their families down from Fort Vancouver and Oregon City. These included James Welch, David Ingalls, Samuel Smith, and Robert Shortess. Smith settled on land still called Smith Point. Shortess chose the area now known as Alderbrook. He named the streets Ash, Birch, and Cedar, names which have been retained through the years. McClure designated the streets in his section by names of Indian chiefs. Thus a portion of the present Commercial Street was called Squemocqha. The present system of names was adopted in 1895.



Astoria circa 1846. Courtesy Clatsop County Historical Society.

In 1847, James Shively traveled to the nation's capital to receive his appointment as the first postmaster west of the Rockies. Upon his return, he established the post office in his home on the present 15th Street between Franklin and Exchange. The spot is now marked by ornamental trees and a marble obelisk. Postage back to the States was forty cents per letter.



Site of first post office. Photo courtesy Daily Astorian.

By 1850, the town had grown to 250 settlers. In 1854, Astoria became the county seat. Schools, churches, and mercantile establishments were springing up, and a few permanent homes were built. Of these, two are still standing, the building at 817 Exchange and the residence at 1337 Franklin Avenue.



1337 Franklin Avenue; 1852: the Hiram Brown house, oldest house in Astoria and one of the oldest in Oregon. Photo courtesy Daily Astorian.

In the 60's, 70's, and 80's, immigrants from the north European countries began to settle in Astoria, as well as the continued influx from the east coast. They all began to build permanent homes, often with each builder aiming to construct a bigger and better one than his neighbor. A recent survey by the Historic Buildings and Sites Commission indicates that at least 400 homes built in Astoria before 1900 are still in use as residences.



469 Bond Street; 1863: the John Hobson house, Astoria's oldest residence to remain in continuous family ownership. (National Register of Historic Places) Photo courtesy Daily Astorian.

ASTORIANS WERE MANY PEOPLE

There were many facets of life in Astoria during the last half of the 1800's. Some Indians still lived in the area, though during the 1830's, hundreds had died from a recurring fever, probably a form of malaria. Those remaining lived chiefly in the area of Tongue Point, Miles Crossing, and Warrenton. In the latter settlement was the home of Solomon Smith and his wife, Celiast, daughter of Coboway, chief of the Clatsop tribe. They established the first school in Oregon in their home. She was frequently called upon to settle quarrels between Indians and whites, at one time saving the life of a settler, Thomas Owens. She and her husband reared their own six children as well as several foster children. They sent their eldest son, Silas, to study law in New Hampshire. He returned to become a successful lawyer in Astoria for many years. Celiast died in 1891 and is buried in the Pioneer Cemetery in Clatsop Plains with her husband who died in 1876.

Even though Astoria was situated in an isolated area where the only roads were trails through the woods, the only highways were the waterways, and many city streets were planks on piling, there was a lively interest in professional and public affairs. In 1873, DeWitt Clinton Ireland established the *Astorian*, a highly rated newspaper which has continued its publication and rating since that time. Through it, public figures became known around the state.

Political candidates campaigned with greater ease when a road was finally opened between east Astoria (Adairville) and west Astoria in 1878 and between Astoria and Seaside in 1888. Four governors of Oregon have lived in Astoria for at least a portion of their lives: A.W. Norblad, Oswald West, Ben Olcott, and Robert Holmes. Numerous other state and national officials have had their roots in Astoria.

A woman characteristic of this professional and public interest was Bethenia Owens-Adair, the daughter of Thomas Owens whose life was saved by Celiast. Dr. Owens-Adair was the first woman doctor west of the Rockies. After graduating from an eastern medical college, she returned to this area, where she gave herself unstintingly to her practice, often rowing up the various streams in the night to take care of emergencies. With boundless energy, she supported Prohibition, suffrage, education, nutrition. With any new idea for the benefit of humanity, she took to the lecture trail, leaving a worthy mark on the State of Oregon before her death in 1926. It is to honor her that the housing project for senior citizens has been named the Owens-Adair.



3480 Franklin Street; 1875: the Christian Leinenweber house. After years as a one-family home, then an apartment house, this example of Victorian Italianate is now being restored. Photo courtesy of Clatsop County Historical Museum.



3652 Duane Street; 1888: the Benjamin Young house, outstanding example of Victorian architecture; owned by descendants of original family (National Register of Historic Places) Photo courtesy Daily Astorian.

Another face of early Astoria was the remarkable interest in culture and gracious living epitomized by the elegant homes built in various sections of the town. The Flavel mansion, now occupied by the Clatsop County Historical Museum, is an outstanding example. The house, designed by a San Francisco architect and built for Captain George C. Flavel and his wife, Mary Christiana Boelling in 1883, is now recognized as one of the outstanding examples of Victorian architecture in Oregon. Captain Flavel, one of the first licensed bar pilots, ship owner, landholder, and financier, and his wife, gracious hostess and philanthropist, did much to promote the progress and culture of the town.

They and residents of other spacious homes, kept immaculate by numerous servants, extended frequent hospitality to visiting dignitaries and sponsored dramatic presentations and musicales. The Flavel mansion, the Hobson residence at 469 Bond Street, and the Benjamin Young house at 3652 Duane Street are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The two latter homes have been occupied continuously by descendants of the original owners. Captain Flavel died in 1893 and his wife in 1928.

Not all of Astoria, however, exuded grace and culture. In the 70's and 80's, Astoria was a wide-open town. One record says that with its 2,500 inhabitants, it was a river and seaport town with a night life that fairly blazed. It was the high spot between San Francisco and Seattle for gambling, drinking, and ladies of the night. Bond Street was the commercial artery of the town, but Astor Street was where the excitement was. Liberty Hall, just beyond the present post office, was the showplace of the town, ser-

ving as theater, dance hall, and burlesque house. All the buildings in the downtown area were built on pilings with water lapping underneath as the tides rose and fell. Children hung their fish poles out the windows during the Sunday School hour.



Astor house and Methodist Church on corner of 11th and Duane Streets circa 1895. Photo courtesy Astoria Public Library.

Many saloons and bawdy houses had trap doors under which shanghaiers waited with boats to receive the drunken patrons when the proprietors rolled them down for a fee. One madame is reported to have rolled her husband down for two hundred dollars. He sobered up far out at sea and returned two years later. Shanghaiing was so rampant that cannery workers often carried guns as they went to work on the night shifts.

One dark night, the Methodist preacher, a former prize fighter, was in the belfry ringing the bell for the evening prayer meeting when two shanghaiers tried to drag him out. However, he was able to fight them off and later conducted the service in torn clothing, and for the next few days, a ship's runner was seen around town minus his front teeth.

OTHER IMMIGRANTS ARRIVE

It was chiefly the floating population that was responsible for the rough side of Astoria. Drifters came in from San Francisco and all over the nation for the salmon season, nearly doubling the town's population. Then immigrants from Norway, Sweden and Finland began to come in large numbers. They became permanent residents, leaving less work to attract the drifters.



687 Fourteenth Street; Picture depicts queen's float of the 1903 Regatta returning Queen Fanny Thomas to her home. Building 1889 is now Elmore Apartments. The Regatta continues to be held each year during mid-August. Photo courtesy Clatsop County Historical Museum.

Chinese workers were brought to America to work on the railroads. Many came to Astoria in the 1880's. Descendants of those who settled are now business and professional people of the community. Norwegians and Swedes came initially to work in the woods, but they quickly started businesses as well. The Finns were more often fishery and cannery workers. They comprised the largest group of immigrants. In 1900, Astoria had a population of eight thousand, two thousand of whom were native born Finns and their children. They tended to settle in the west part of town, sometimes called Uniontown because it was near the Union Fish Cannery.

All the immigrant groups were made up of stable, energetic people with one great, common interest - education for their children. They promoted and supported public schools and sent many graduates on to colleges and universities. Upon one occasion, the Finns were so desirous of having a grade school in Uniontown that they offered volunteer labor for its construction. As a result, Taylor school was opened in 1902 on the site where Crestview Convalescent Center now stands. In 1925, when a portion of the land began to slide, the building was condemned, and the present Captain Robert Gray school was built to replace it.

Along with the early interest in education, other progress was being made. A telegraph line to Astoria was completed in 1876. The first telephone was installed in 1877. Electric street lights appeared on Christmas Eve 1885. The first public library service was offered in 1892,



Astoria's second post office completed January 1873 at a cost of \$68,000. This building was dismantled in 1931 for the construction of the present federal building completed in 1933 at a cost of \$232,750. Building at left is the original Grace Episcopal church built in 1867 and continuing in use until 1886. Photo courtesy post office, Astoria, Oregon.

and the first high school commencement took place in 1893 with three members in the graduating class.

One feature of life in Astoria during the late 1800's was the large number of people who resided in boarding houses, since apartment house living at that time was largely unknown. The boarding houses often served as social and cultural centers for working people and newcomers. This was especially true of the Finnish boarding houses which became the first homes for newly-arrived immigrants. Twelve boarding houses were located within a few blocks of Suomi Hall. One of the buildings, now called Bridge Rooms, is still in use.

A boarding house was usually known by its landlady. She advised newcomers on where to get jobs, whether to go to a bloodletter or a doctor, and how to stay out of jail. She would go to the bank with her new guests, interpret for them, then help them count their money. Upon occasion, she offered helpful advice upon which of her hired girls would make the best wives, so many a boarding house romance led straight from the kitchen to the altar - and many a newly-arrived immigrant was awed to find a woman who had been a lowly milkmaid in Finland now a woman of influence in Astoria.

ASTORIA ENTERS THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This phase of Astoria life flourished from the 1880's until World War I, when immigrants, no longer newcomers, gradually abandoned their native speech and customs. Now the Midsummer Festival held each year on the Saturday nearest June 21 is doing much to generate appreciation for those immigrants who brought much stability and vitality to Astoria.

So, from a fur trading post in 1811 to an established community in 1900, diverse people, cultures, and events combined to give Astoria a unique and significant place in history. By the time the nineteenth century merged into the twentieth, many pioneer conditions and customs had been left behind. New events, such as two world wars, the catastrophic fire of 1922, and the opening of the Astoria bridge in 1966 brought changes and growth. Now this recent past is history too. Yet along with the change and progress, a certain nostalgia lingers in the town, an abiding appreciation of its early, historic heritage.



Scandinavian dancers are a feature of the annual Midsummer Festival. Photo courtesy of The Daily Astorian.

NOTES

The City of Astoria sponsors frequent contacts with its sister city, Waldorf, Germany, birthplace of John Jacob Astor.

The present Astoria Public Library building was made possible by substantial gifts from the British descendants of John Jacob Astor, local American Legion Post No. 12, and other generous donors. Lord Gavin Astor and Lady Astor came from England to attend the dedication of the Library on October 8, 1967.

The Atlas of Oregon includes this statement in its description of Astoria:

Downtown Astoria was destroyed by fire in 1922 and has been rebuilt. But beyond the downtown are block after block of substantial frame houses, many dating from the middle to the late 19th century . . . Thus Astoria is a period place, a reminder of earlier days before the accelerated demands of modern living.

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